



'The Long Night' by Ernst Bornstein

What's your story?

2. How do autobiographies start?

How can we use language to describe our experiences?

An online self-study course about the Holocaust for secondary school students studying English in KS3 and 4.

Short lesson 2: Welcome!



Hello and welcome – great to see you again. I'm Dr Tom Haward, and if you click on my picture you'll be able to see a couple of minutes of film introducing you to the next part of this course.

Overview



This is this the second short, 30-minute lesson that I've put together for you to help think about how language can be used to tell the stories of our lives.

In this 30 minute lesson you are going to;

- a) Look at three examples of how autobiographies start and identify effective features (15 mins.)
- b) Have a go yourself at using language to start your own life story (15 mins.)



Key terms for this lesson

You may find some of these words useful for this short lesson

Key term	Meaning
autobiographical	where the author writes about their own life
biography	a book where the author writes about someone else's life
dialogue	Direct speech that uses quotation (or speech) marks (“...”)
first person	writing using ‘I’ or ‘we’
imagery	writing that creates a picture of something in your mind
point of view	the type of voice an author uses (e.g. ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘she’, ‘they’)
simile	where two things are compared using ‘as’ or ‘like’
testimony	being a witness to a significant event
third person	writing using ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘they’

How would you start your own autobiographical writing?



If you were writing the story of your life so far, how would you start?

Before you have a go, let's see what three other authors have done to start. For each of the next three slides, read the introductions to three different autobiographies and answer the questions that go with them. You can then go to the following slide which will tell you a bit more about them and the language they are using.

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE A

'Dad.'

'Yes?'

'How big's the boat that's taking us to Portugal?'

'I don't really know. Pretty big, I should think.'

'As big as a killer whale?'

'What? Oh yes, easily.'

'As big as a blue whale?'

'Yes, of course, as big as any kind of whale.'

'Bigger?'

'Yes, much bigger.'

'How much bigger?'

'Never you mind how much bigger. Just bigger is all I can tell you.'

There is a break, and the discussion resumes:

... *'Dad.'*

'Yes?'

'If two tigers jumped on a blue whale, could they kill it?'

Autobiographies sometimes use **dialogue** to help the reader imagine a scene the author's life.

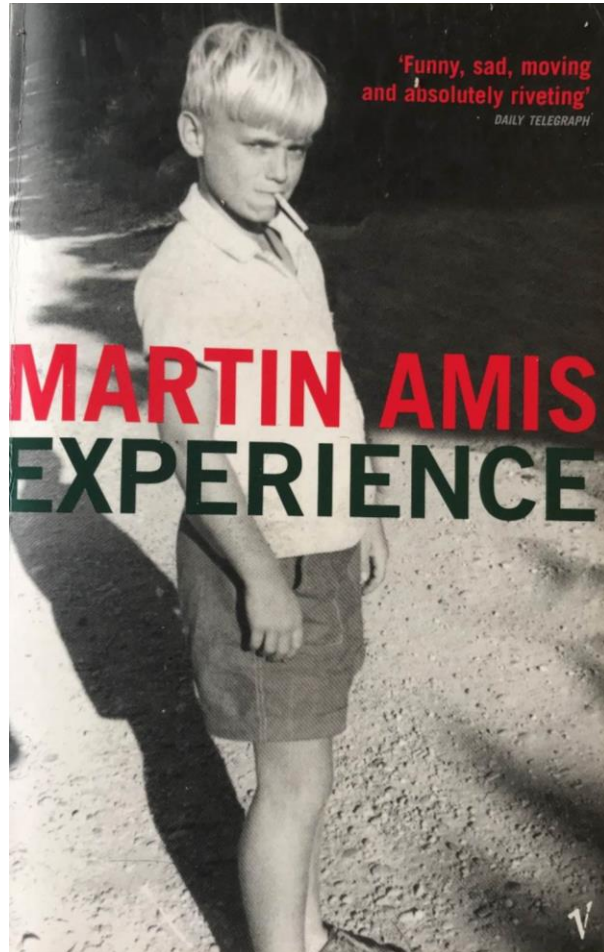
In this dialogue, can you;

- Suggest something about who the two people speaking are?
- Give one word to describe the character of each of them?

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE A



This is from the start of an autobiography called 'Experience' by Martin Amis. In it he uses **dialogue** to help the reader imagine a scene from his life.

- In the book, the two characters are a boy, Martin, and his dad, Kingsley Amis, a famous writer.
- Martin uses dialogue to show what life was like without having to explain it directly. We can tell from this opening that Martin is **curious**, always asking questions. His dad is patient with his questions, but eventually gets **annoyed**, saying 'never you mind how much bigger. Just bigger is all I can tell you.' The dialogue also uses humour; when Martin starts asking more questions about tigers, you can imagine his dad might start to get really irritated and fed up!

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE B

‘ “What you looking at me for? I didn’t come to stay...”

I hadn’t so much forgot as I couldn’t bring myself to remember. Other things were more important.

“What you looking at me for? I didn’t come to stay...”

Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms.’

This is a more challenging passage of writing to understand. The author uses a **simile** is a figure speech that compares two things, using the words ‘**as**’ or ‘**like**’.

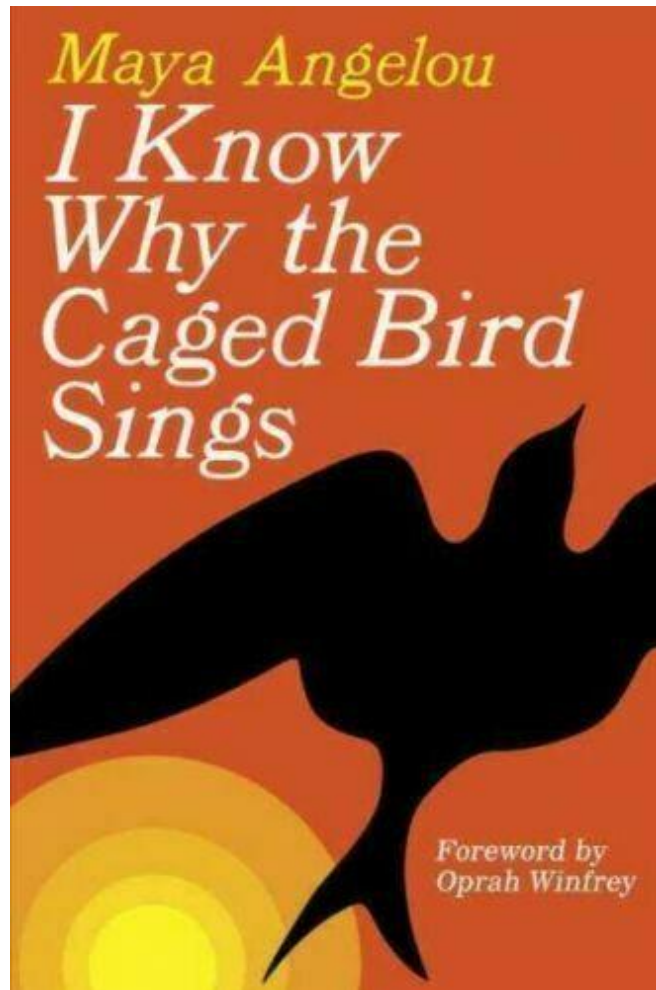
- What two things are being compared in this opening? What idea does this image give about how the author is feeling?

*immaterial - unimportant

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE B



This is the start of an autobiography called 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' by Maya Angelou.

The **simile** she uses compares 'the truth' with 'a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists.' This is used to create an image of unhappiness and frustration..

This opening is in a church in a small town called Stamps in Arkansas in America. Maya has to read a poem that she can't quite remember and is embarrassed. She thinks she looks ugly, and as an African-American girl she also suffers from the racism that then existed in that part of America.

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE C

‘On 1 September 1939 we were woken up early in the morning by bursts of thunder. We could not decide if it was exploding bombs or thunderous gunfire.’

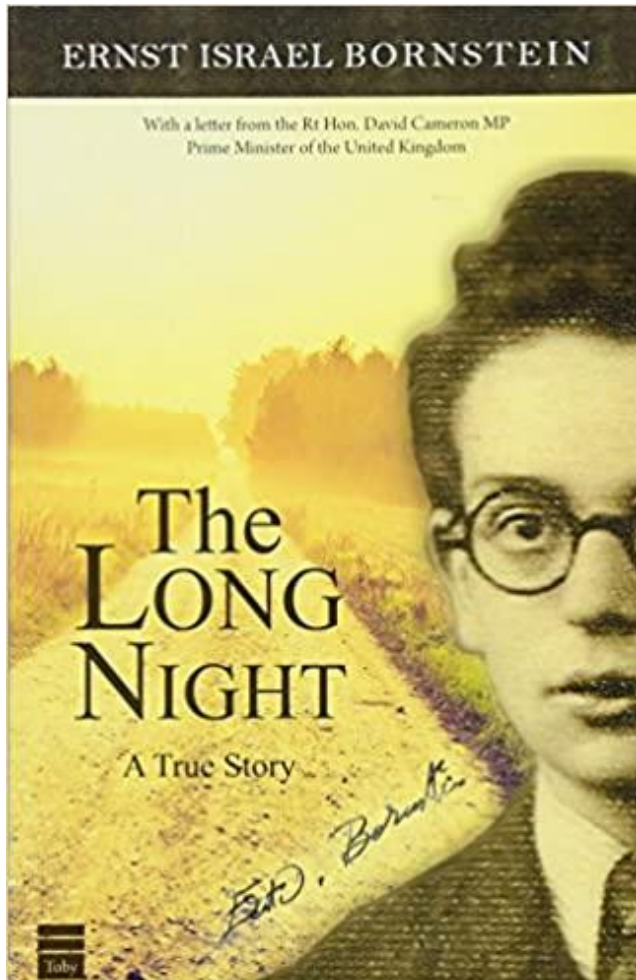
The **point of view** is the type of voice the author is using. The **‘first person’** is where the author speaks with their own voice, using **‘I’** or **‘we’**. The **‘third person’** is where the author describes other people, using **‘he,’ ‘she’** or **‘they.’**

- In this opening, what point of view is being used? Why might most autobiographies use this point of view?

How can language be used to start an autobiography?



EXAMPLE C



This is the start of an autobiography called 'The Long Night' by Ernst Bornstein

The **point of view** he uses is the 'first person.' Nearly all autobiographies are written using 'I' or 'we' because the author is telling their own story.

This is actually a special form of autobiography called a **testimony**. You'll be finding out a lot more about Ernst's story and what testimony is over the next two lessons.

What would be the first lines of your own autobiography?



Now it's your turn!

Write the first few lines of your own autobiography. Don't worry too much about how it turns out. At the moment you're just experimenting to find a voice – a way of writing about yourself and your experiences – that suits you.

When you've finished, show someone at home to see what they think. You could also email it to your teacher to get their opinion too.

But do try to include these three things that we've been talking about this lesson;

- A piece of **dialogue** to help the reader imagine a scene.
- A **simile** to make your writing richer and more descriptive.
- A '**first person**' point of view, using 'I' or 'we'.

Also remember the features we encountered last lesson; **verb tense**, **characterisation**, creating a sense of **mystery**, and **describing detail**

What would be the first lines of your own autobiography?



If you're a bit stuck just getting writing, here are some sentence starters. You can choose any one – use it as it is or change it a bit - and get going!

I'd say my life is completely ordinary. No different from anyone else down our street. Or at least it was until the day that...

'Dad, can I ask you a question?'...

They say your bedroom reflects your personality. Well, if that's true then my bedroom is like a...

My family are impossible. In fact, I think they're insane. They're always doing weird things. Take my mum for instance...



Features of autobiographical writings

To summarise, in the last two lessons we have come across some key features of autobiographical writing. These include the use of;

- Verb tense
- Characterisation
- Mystery
- Objective and subjective details
- Dialogue
- Imagery such as similes
- First person point of view

Don't worry if you can't remember them all, but hopefully you might start to recognise and use these in your reading and writing.

End of short lesson 2



Well done!

You have now started thinking about some of the ways authors use language to start writing about their experiences, and even had a go yourself.

In the next two short lessons you will be looking more closely at how Ernst Bornstein uses language to describe experiences he had that were quite extraordinary. You will also start to understand why life stories, such as Ernst's, can be so important.

'What's your story?'

2. How do autobiographies start?



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